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Non-Fiction (1,139 Words)

## The Night of December 1983

December '83: Michael Jackson does *Thriller* as a 14-minute video and Jehovah's Witnesses hate him for it.

This ain't about that, though.

In this story, it was a cold clear dry winter's eve in Las Vegas Nevada, and the Agent Orange album *Living in Darkness* cracked from vinyl off a baby blue Sears portable turntable. Four of us were a mere block from Northtown (aka North Las Vegas) in a bleak, oddly geometric government projects domicile.

At 18, I was youngest. The rest were age 20.

Except for one.

We were hidden in an upstairs bedroom, a square with no vents and no windows. Pretty obvious some guy or gal from the bottom of the graduating class designed the room, part of a two-story townhouse on a campus-style complex of 300 similar units. My then best friend Vinnie K was often inclined to call the complex a "Futuristic Communistic Government Cubicle Society."

And right now Vinnie, age 21 and resident king, was room-center on a cheap metal chair he'd earlier grabbed from the first floor kitchen table. Said chair was facing the door he'd just closed and locked.

See, Vinnie actually *lived* in the Government Cubicle Society, with his very Catholic divorced single mom—who was that minute downstairs, watching sitcoms from a doily-clad recliner. A one-time Vegas hotel maid with thick, awkward glasses, she'd eventually become a shriveled little turnip, quite unnaturally aged beyond her 61 years.

Yeah, Vinnie's mom was a grey bag o'bones with a voice made sandy from eons of cigarettes. And she just *knew* her live-in teenage son smoked the filthy Satan herb, *Marijuana*. She Goddamned hated the fact, too. But she'd never actually caught Vinnie with smoke, nor had she ever found his stash...try like hell as she did.

For us, by the way, marijuana was known as "*Jahlah*" from a badly misinterpreted Reggae lyric. Pronounced "jaw-law," you see. It's possible Vinnie's mom never understood the ref, which we often and openly used around her, usually as a single-word query.

Right now Vinnie had on his lap a *Jahlah* bud-cleaning tray, which was really just a cheap tin cracker platter his mom picked-up from a Vegas novelty shop.

And remember, this was 1983: in Vegas (and most places) possessing even a used marijuana half-doob could put an unlucky Homo sapiens right in the clink. For a year or more. Sometimes ten.

Anyway, Vinnie was cleaning his "boing," a periodic beloved ritual. He busily poked resin from the stem, intensely over-scraping the bowl to prepare a feast for he, I, and two other Northtowners. While waiting we talked of women, song, Dungeons & Dragons®, weed, and, of course, political trickery (aka the long abandoned Rancho High School Theatre Department).

And by the way, D&D banter aside, Vinnie was *anything* but a geek. He was Fonzie to my Richie Cunningham, a tall tough street-savvy "Tim Curry good-looking" female addicted ex-New Yorker, living wild between outlaw and genius.

And Vinnie was long out of high school. So that made him *really* cool.

Finished with cleaning, Vinnie unfurled a plastic baggie of red hair marijuana he'd gotten from "Dave". With loving kindness he pulled some of the highly illegal plant material, inspecting product like a jeweler on diamond. Vinnie placed the pulled portion on the tray, carefully picked and fluffed the prime sensimilla from a knotted stem.

He paused, nodded his head and gazed my way very seriously: "Excellent skunk-bud, buddy, guaranteed to blow your fuckin' doors right *off*."

On this, Vinnie's mom opened the bedroom door.

No warning at all. No sound. Nothing. Wow, she must've been *very* careful about her footsteps up the stairs, correct?

I also saw Vinnie *lock* the damned door a few minutes ago! How it magically opened for his mom is to this day a mystery. But there she stood. And boy was she pissed.

Vinnie's face told us that his mind was clearly wiped. Picture it: She flings the door and there sits Vinnie, full-frontal facing her, tray, bong, reefer, baggie— all of it in his lap, on *her* Vegas novelty tray!

She had him.

Complete silence as she stared at Vinnie in a long, sour beat. Then she yelled—in that rusted voice—"*If you're gonna smoke pot, I want you the hell outta my house!!*"

She smashed the door shut and took herself downstairs. This time we *definitely* heard the footfalls. Wow.

I'd never in all the years hanging around seen Vinnie's normally meek mom so afire with resolve and conviction. Very uncharacteristic.

Vinnie said nothing. He was obviously angry, violated, embarrassed as hell. He matter of factly blanked the tray from his lap, gathered baggie and buds, grabbed his bad-assed black leather biker jacket off the floor, killed the Agent Orange (in the middle of *Bloodstains*, no less).

"Let's go," he commanded, ala Roman centurion dude.

None of us said a word as we quickly dressed for the cold North Vegas night we knew was coming. Afterward we followed Vinnie down the stairs, rank and file.

The first floor front door was positioned precisely to the left of the spot where Vinnie's mom always sat, next to a yellowing table lamp with an upstate New York rosary strung across. And there she was, all bundled in off-color crochet, staring at blue-white TV sitcoms with a big, happy smile.

Vinnie opened the front door.

Vegas Valley light pollution was minimal back then, so you could see lots of stars in the night sky. Even the Milky Way itself. Being cloudless as it was...man, what a sight.

Vinnie's mom looked over as we made the exit. In a completely and totally incongruous shift of tone she playfully hollered, "Hey, where ya goin'?! To a parade?!"

Nevermind that it was close to 10 PM, and near freezing.

Vinnie didn't stop or look. He angrily shot back, "No, mom, we're goin' outside to smoke a fuckin' joint, do you *mind*...?"

Not one of us laughed, but strangely, Vinnie's mom *did*. I'm sure it was one of those reflexive things we all do in times of insecurity and/or confusion.

Or something.

It was plain to me that nothing would come of the swords, anyway: Vinnie and his mom rode a totally symbiotic mine cart. Neither could possibly survive without the other.

And they both knew it.

But it was indeed ironic when a decade later, Vinnie's mom flew from Vegas to some small town in upstate New York...and died after a health incident before the plane even landed. Vinnie didn't know about it til well after she was buried and forgot. He couldn't have afforded the flight out there, anyway.

Sad.

I was the last to leave The Government Cubicle, so I smiled and waved at Vinnie's mom: "Goodnight, Mrs. K."

I closed the door and walked off under the Milky Way.

End.